

THE "SOAPY" SMITH TRAGEDY



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THE
"SOAPY"
SMITH
TRAGEDY



Shea & Patten
Skagway, Alaska
1907

The "Soapy" Smith Tragedy

YEARS before Lieutenant Schwatka told the world the wonders of the mighty river of the north, gold hunters had roamed throughout the vast interior of Alaska and washed little fortunes from its myriad rivers. Every year the train of argonauts who packed their provisions over the pass and drifted down the lakes and rivers in their boats of whip-sawed lumber increased, but the world knew less about the Northern Eldorado than of the fastnesses of Thibet.

There was a fraternal spirit among those pioneer prospectors. Their differences were well and equitably settled in miner's meetings. Honesty and fair dealing was invariable.

But in '97, after the discoverers of the Klondike had astounded the world with the fortunes they had brought down to Seattle in coal oil cans and other makeshifts that could be employed to contain their treasure, the machinery of the law was extended to the northland. From a land of peace and security the trail to the goldfields became a safe field for thugs and outlaws.

Whenever the travelers to the interior undertook to redress outrages they were frustrated by legally constituted authorities backed by soldiers. The miner whose all was invested in an outfit scattered along the trail was given to understand he must go before a commissioner, make complaint and give bonds or be jailed for his appearance months hence, at a trial held a hundred miles away. Redress meant ruin and he bore his wrongs in preference. Officials were exe-



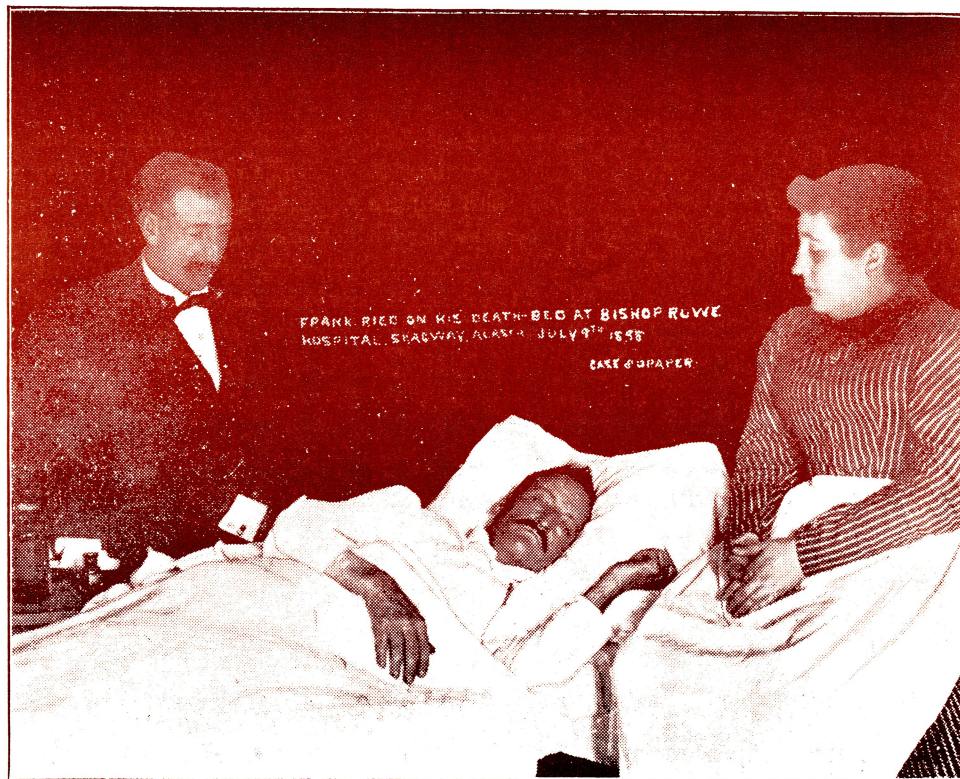
STEWART AND HIS POKE OF GOLD—ROBBED ON THE STREETS OF
SKAGWAY BY "SOAPY" SMITH AND HIS GANG

cutting the laws but the laws were inapplicable to the conditions. Criminals flocked to a country that thus became an elysium for grafters.

In the course of a few weeks a city of tents marked the gateway of a new route to the interior over the White Pass, and Skagway became a swarming hive of men, women, horses, cattle and dogs, with lives strained at carrying burdens over a trail that had a few years before been deemed impassable.

Respectable people were too engrossed in their arduous pursuits to effectively organize against the depredations of the criminal element. Jefferson R. Smith, notoriously known as "Soapy" Smith, a sharper of wide reputation on the frontier and a masterful man, saw his opportunity and organized the horde of thugs, sure-thing sharpers and rascals of every stripe. The treasure filched by his gang of criminals was irresistible bait for a number of men of ability, some of them graduates of the great universities and members of the liberal professions. They presumably had led lawful lives before yielding to the hypnotic influence of this arch-rascal. Merchants and business men, hungry for the lavish patronage of the gang of rogues, condoned, aided and abetted. There was a reign of terror in Skagway. Honest men were intimidated. The people were cowed. It was the policy of the gang to prey upon transient travelers and leave such residents as did not oppose them unmolested. The better element became caloused and submissive.

In February, '98, a tragedy occurred which goaded decent people to resistance. A man was robbed in one of the saloons by the aid of the bartender. Restitution was demanded. Upon the refusal of the bartender his victim threatened to redress his injury. He left the saloon and returned in company with



FRANK REID ON HIS DEATH-BED AT BISHOP ROWE
HOSPITAL, SKAGWAY, ALASKA, JULY 9TH, 1898

DAKE & BAKER

FRANK REID ON HIS DEATH-BED AT BISHOP ROWE HOSPITAL, SKAGWAY, ALASKA,
JULY 9TH, 1898

the Deputy United States Marshal. As they were walking to the bar the bartender drew a revolver and fatally shot both men before they could offer any resistance. A vigilance committee was quickly formed and the bartender was taken into custody. He was given the choice of being tried for his life by a jury of twelve or lynched forthwith and he chose the former. He was tried according to compact. The jury found the evidence tended to show that the bartender acted in self defense and he was released.

The ice was broken and the vigilance committee proceeded to perfect its organization, but it got an immediate set-back. "Soapy" got his thugs, newspapermen, attorneys and abettors among the business men into prompt action and a counter organization called the "Law and Order Committee of Three Hundred and Three" came into immediate and effective evidence. The members of the vigilance committee straightway crawled back into their shells where they remained until the tragedy that freed the community.

Smith was becoming an important man. The prefix "Soapy" was used only in the sense that the President is called "Teddy" and it gave the public little shock when one of the local newspapers referred to him as the Honorable Jefferson Randolph Smith.---That was when he was thanked by the War Department for a patriotic offer to equip a company for the Spanish-American War.

The last public display of "Soapy's" power was on the Fourth of July, when as marshal of the day, he rode at the head of the parade. All the gang with its aiders and admirers and the weaker-kneed business men who feared to offend the uncrowned king by absence, had prominent positions in the line.

The goose that was laying the golden egg was fast being killed. The or-



THE NOTORIOUS "SOAPY" SMITH IN THE MORGUE, JULY 8TH, 1898

ganized lawlessness of Skagway began to be realized by the army of miners, traders and speculators who traveled to and from the Yukon. Many people with money or treasure gave this most available route to the interior a wide berth. There was less loot to be had. To keep "business" moving the gang was spurred to bolder crimes. Local merchants were finally brought to a realization that not only had their transient patronage been driven away but that the patronizing power of the gang was fast dwindling. In this way a spirit of rectitude was engendered. The business people were brought to see that robbery, murder and skin games did not pay. But they were not hot-headed, radical agitators. On the contrary they were types of cool, collected and conservative people, loth to see a too sudden change from organized crime to established decency. Spasmodic changes effect business.

Such were conditions when on Friday, July 7, J. D. Stewart, a young miner, came out from Dawson with a sack containing \$2,700.00 in gold dust. One Bowers ingratiated himself into Stewart's confidence and steered him into "Soapy's" saloon. Here he was generously treated and all were curious to see the dust. Many of them claimed they had never seen any before and the sack was handed about from one to the other. Mr. Stewart was treated with marked attention by these leading citizens. One of them escorted him out in the back yard to see a captive eagle. While Stewart was gazing at the bird two of the gang seized and held him while another grabbed the heavy poke and fled with it. When the robbed man was finally released the gang gathered about him, gave their assurance that he was but the victim of a practical joke and that the gold would soon be returned. Confidence thus restored, the thieves had plenty



AUTOPSY ON BODY OF "SOAPY" SMITH SHOWING BULLET WOUNDS

of time to secrete the loot. It was several hours before Stewart fully realized that he had been robbed. He sought the Deputy United States Marshal and laid his complaint. That official, however, made his usual promises of the prompt action from which he invariably refrained. During the afternoon Stewart told his story to prominent men about town. Several of the more courageous citizens began the reorganization of the Vigilance Committee. Prominent business men went to "Soapy" "on the quiet" and asked him to restore. He promised to use his "influence" provided there was no "roar" but hours passed and the gold was not returned.

Meantime the vigilantes were busy. A meeting to convene on the old Juneau wharf was quietly called. It was impossible to keep "Soapy" from catching an inkling of what was in progress. Far from scenting his Waterloo, however, he marshalled his forces, resolved to carry the situation by force and fortified his resolution by excessive drink.

During the later hours of the afternoon the feeling that the time for a crucial test of strength between decency and crime was at hand became general. The bluster of "Soapy" and his gang found counterpart in the quiet but determined demeanor of the vigilantes, while the conservative business element was on a nervous *qui vive* to so trim its actions that the cause of the party that might come out on top could be espoused with becoming grace. As the evening waned the vigilantes, armed with magazine guns and revolvers, gathered at the wharf. A chairman was elected and a committee of four appointed to guard the approach.



FUNERAL OF FRANK REID ON THE STREET OF SKAGWAY, 1898

One of these guards was a prominent citizen of the town. Skagway will perpetuate his name.

Frank H. Reid was one of the first pioneers who landed at Skagway in '97. He immediately became active in the material interests of the community. He was elected "City Engineer" by the provisional "City Council" and laid out the townsite. All Skagway property is bought and sold "according to Reid's survey."

The following is an account, published at the time in a local newspaper of the tragedy that ensued:

"It was while this committee of four was stationed at the end of the dock that "Soapy" appeared carrying a Winchester in his hands. He walked straight up to Reid and, with an oath, asked what he was doing there, at the same time striking at him with the barrel of the gun. Reid grabbed the gun in his left hand as it descended, pushing it down towards the ground, and drawing his revolver with his right hand at the same time. When the point of the rifle was close against Reid's right groin, Smith pulled the trigger. The ball passed clear through and came out through the lower part of the right hip. At about the same time Reid fired two or three shots in rapid succession, one of which pierced Smith's heart, another striking one of his legs. Smith also fired a second shot, striking Reid in the leg. Both men fell at about the same time, "Soapy" Smith stone dead and City Engineer Reid dangerously, perhaps mortally, wounded.

"Needless to say, the meeting which was in session further down the dock speedily adjourned. The dead and wounded men were picked up and brought to town, Smith's remains being taken to the undertaker's, and Mr. Reid being



BUSY ON "SOAPY" SMITH'S BODY IN THE SKAGWAY MORGUE JULY 9TH, 1898



ROUNDING UP "SOAPY" SMITH GANG AT CITY HALL, SKAGWAY, ALASKA



FUNERAL OF FRANK REID AT CEMETARY, SKAGWAY, ALASKA, JULY 18TH, 1898

carefully carried to Dr. Moore's office, where a number of physicians made a careful examination of his wounds." * * * * *

At first it was thought the wounded man could live but a few hours but he rallied, and, as hopes were entertained that he would recover, he was taken to the Bishop Rowe hospital where every care that could be lavished upon him by the citizens of a grateful community was bestowed.

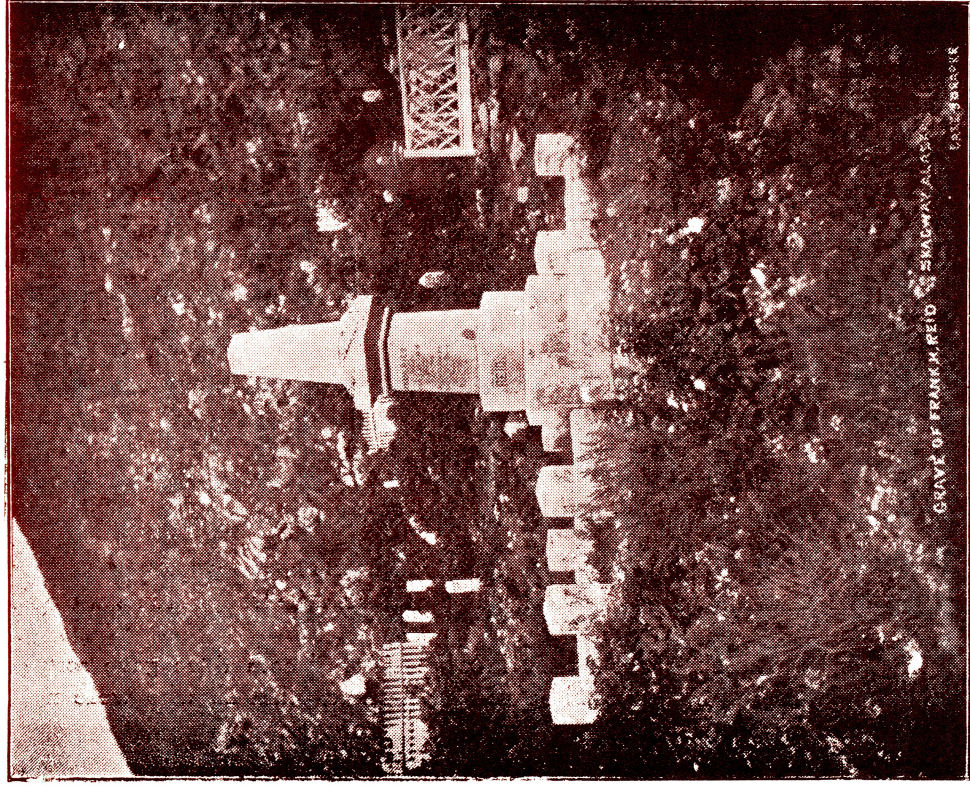
On the following day, Saturday, an inquest was held at the morgue over the remains of the dead leader, under the auspices of the United States Commissioner. An autopsy was made by the leading physicians of the town.

The jury called numerous witnesses and carefully sifted the evidence, the session lasting until half past four o'clock in the afternoon when the following verdict was returned to the Commissioner:--

"We, the jurors called to inquire into the cause of the death of Jefferson Randolph Smith, after each and all of us having examined the body of said Smith, and having heard the evidence of Dr. Cornelius and Dr. Whiting upon their medical examination of said body, and also the evidence of witnesses who were present at the death of said Smith, which took place on the Juneau Wharf, City of Skagway, District of Alaska, U. S. A., between the hours of nine and ten p. m. on July 8th, 1898, hereby find:

"That Smith came to his death by reason of a pistol wound piercing his heart.

"That said wound was the result of a pistol shot fired by one Frank H. Reid, who now lies in the Bishop Rowe Hospital, of Skagway, dangerously wounded from shots received at the hands of the deceased, the said Smith.



GRAVE OF FRANK REID, SKAGWAY, ALASKA
EASTMAN

GRAVE OF FRANK REID, SKAGWAY, ALASKA

"That such shooting on the part of the said Reid was in self defense, and in the opinion of this jury entirely justifiable."

The Honorable Jefferson Randolph Smith, the free hearted "Soapy", the generous good fellow and acknowledged leader of the town, worshiped by his gang, courted by the business people and tolerated by everybody, had none to do him honor when he fell. Many of his most servile courtiers were immediately in evidence in displaying guns and loudly proclaiming their determination to aid in rooting out the gang.

The Commissioner had deputized a number of special officers and under their direction the forces of law and order were quickly marshalled. Those concerned in the robbery of Stewart took to the hills. But guards were sent out on the trails, at the wharves and along the water front, barring every avenue of escape. The mounted police were notified and gave their aid in closing the Canadian frontier to the criminals.

By 6 o'clock on the evening of July 9, fourteen suspects were rounded up at the City Hall where they were placed under guard. On Sunday all those who were connected with the robbery were captured in the hills. There was talk of lynching when the criminals were conveyed to the City Hall, where a dense mass of people had crowded. Soon it became bruited that the United States troops were on their way up from the wharf. Such proved the case, for in a few minutes, a company of soldiers, detached from the troops then stationed at Dyce, came marching up Broadway.

In order to rid the town of martial law the citizens' committee gave assurance that no unlawful harm would befall the prisoners,---that all who were not



THE LONELY GRAVE OF "SOAPY" SMITH, SKAGWAY, ALASKA

ordered away from the town would receive legal trials. The committee kept its pledge scrupulously and there was no further death or bloodshed ensuing from the tragedy of the 8 day of July.

A careful search was made for the stolen treasure. It was believed, and with good reason, that some business man of the town was acting as treasurer for "Soapy", but a search warrant, issued by the Commissioner, led to the discovery of Stewart's poke locked in a trunk at "Soapy's" premises. It was \$600 short but Stewart was glad to recover the main bulk of his hard earned stake.

On Monday, July 11, services were held over the remains of the dead desperado. A funeral sermon was preached by a Presbyterian minister with "The Way of the Transgressor is Hard" for the text. Poor "Soapy" had to have a horrible example made of his remains. But he was given decent burial in the Skagway cemetery.

Frank H. Reid lingered at the hospital, apparently recovering and then relapsing by turns, until his demise on the 20th day of July, extinguished the hope of his admirers and friends. Never had there been such a funeral in Alaska. Every vehicle in the town was lined in the cortege and nearly all the population followed the dead hero to his last resting place. The procession marched out of town to a dirge played by the band of the leading variety show. Many tears were shed over the dead hero's bier as his remains were lowered in the grave.

In the center of the old pioneer graveyard rises a granite shaft surrounded by a low stone wall---a sturdy monument reared by a grateful community to the man who gave his life to free Skagway from organized anarchy.

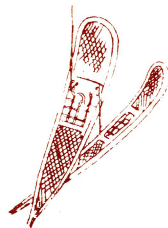


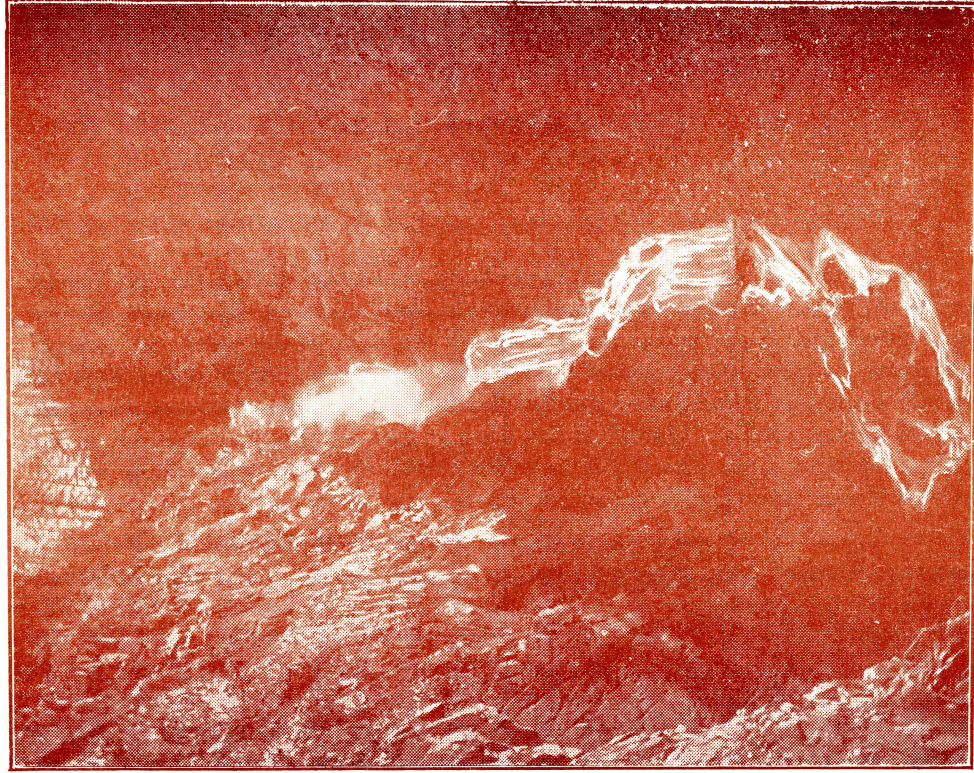
VIEW OF THE "SOAPY" SMITH GANG WHO WERE SHIPPED OUT

At a short distance, marked by a plain wooden headboard, in the tangle of vegetation that has overgrown his grave, lies the remains of him who once governed the head of Lynn Canal with despotic rule and held his sway by craft, intimidation and crime.

Of the members of "Soapy's" gang, some were liberated with solemn warnings, others were taken to the wharf, photographed and exiled, and a few served terms of imprisonment. Some of them have traveled the broad road downward while others, under better influences, are living honest, useful lives.

Out of a dark forest, that mingles with the clouds when the rain falls, over the brink of a mountain, plunges Reid's Falls, to the bench above the river where the people of Skagway have laid their dead, rest the victims of the double tragedy. The dirge of the wind in the spruce trees, the murmur of the river and the roar of the falls alone break the stillness of the quiet spot, save when a passing locomotive shrieks a reminder that civilization now reigns the route to the great gold fields.





REID FALLS

TO THE PUBLIC

Being the possessors of a picture showing scenes attending the last acts in the life of "Soapy" Smith, which is annually looked upon by thousands; having been called upon hundreds of times to relate the story of the career of "Soapy" in this city, coupled with requests from all parts of the country that the facts be put into print, has caused us to publish this little book. No pretense is made towards literary ability. Our effort has been to give a plain, unvarnished recital of the affair, and in such form it is herewith presented to the public from whom we trust it may receive such consideration as it may deserve.

Respectfully,

Skagway, Alaska

Shea & Patten

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